Newsweek
18 November 1968

The Romantic '50s

EVERGREEN REVIEW READER 1957-1967. *Edited by Barney Rosset. 791 pages. Grove Press. $20.*

Commemorating Evergreen Review's first ten years of existence, this anthology dramatically demonstrates that far from being the vehicle for cheap pornography or eccentric experiments that it was once widely regarded to be, this magazine has long been one of the most important literary periodicals in the United States. A few years ago Esquire drew up a rather silly, snobbish map that "placed" all the major American writers and publications; Evergreen Review was relegated to the far left corner. Now, however, it seems abundantly clear that Evergreen has always occupied a very central position. In its first year alone, Evergreen printed important works by Samuel Beckett, Jean-Paul Sartre, Eugène Ionesco and Albert Camus, and introduced its readers to beat writers Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Later, Evergreen was to add to its honor role William Burroughs, Jorge Borges, Friedrich Dürrenmatt and Jean Genet—surely four of the best writers of the century.

From its inception, Evergreen Review was determined to publish whatever was new, but what was new in Europe turned out to be quite different from what was new in the United States. In France, for instance, many writers had become bored with sincerity, with psychological analysis and with the traditions of realism. In a 1957 issue of Evergreen, Alain Robbe-Grillet called for novelists to abandon their attempts to create characters and instead describe the bare, impersonal, observable surfaces of the world. Earlier, Sartre had dismissed the "melancholy cuisine" of books that simply explored the depths of the writer's soul and failed to stir the reader to moral action. Another school of French writers (all represented in the "Evergreen Reader") rejected realism for different reasons; Ionesco, Jacques Prévert and Raymond Queneau expanded the techniques of Dadaism and surrealism to explore the domains of the irrational and the absurd.

Evergreen: Expressing an age

Paradise: In sharp contrast to these European modernists, the American avant-garde was extremely idealistic and sincere—and deeply concerned with the soul of the artist. The beats hit the road to seek out the lost American spiritual paradise. Kerouac looks up to a "blue sky of perfect lostpurity," and Ginsberg sees "angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night." In the late '50s Americans shared little of Sartre's concern for political commitment; they saw all forms of art—prose, poetry, action painting, jazz—as a means of expressing the tormented spirit of the creator. The artist worked spontaneously, under the power of drugs or violent emotions. Martin Williams, Evergreen's intelligent and very professional jazz critic, wrote in 1960 about jazz musician Charlie Parker's "awful dependency on the inspiration and intuition of the moment," and called it "the kind of challenge that no man of sensitivity could carry without inviting disaster."

In an Evergreen interview, painter Franz Kline claims (somewhat inarticulately) that "if you meant it enough when you did it, it will mean that much," and states: "The nature of anguish is translated into different forms."

Exotic: Anguish, spontaneity, intuition—these are the passwords of an important period in American art for which Evergreen Review was perhaps the most immediate expression. It was a romantic period, a cast of mind which found an echo in D. T. Suzuki's writings about Zen that appeared in Evergreen in 1958. Like the American artist, the Zen monk espoused solitude, the "ability to grasp life from within," and anti-intellectuality. The romantic sensibility also embraced exotic corners of experience: prostitution, homosexuality, drug addiction, life in prison, faraway countries or out-of-the-way towns. Even the tape-recorded and transcribed tales of illiterate Arab boys and the halting, primitive English of a Nigerian writer had something to offer to the readers of Evergreen; what mattered was not technical polish or literary strategies but intense feelings.

Today the new American writing seems to be moving away from romanticism. The Evergreen Review is more and more given over to black-power militants and those opposed to capitalism, imperialism and the war in Vietnam. Apocalyptic humorists like Joseph Heller construct surreal parables satirizing the absurdities and incoherence of American institutions and politics, while Thomas Pynchon finds peculiar correspondences between the most unrelated areas of experience. M.E. White, whose brilliant first novel "In the Balance" was published early this year, followed Robbe-Grillet's lead and does not render the soul of her main character but rather coolly narrates the chaotic actions that gratuitously spin off an unfathomable personality. Recoiling from today's cool, hard, impersonal fiction, the reader may well turn, nostalgically, to the "Evergreen Review Reader's" testimonial to a vanishing period when some of our best authors sought to deliver themselves, alive and burning, onto the printed page.

—EDMUND WHITE